

14

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A TRAGEDY OF THE GREAT PLAGUE OF MILAN IN 1630.

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In early Bible history there are records of the utter destruction of temples or even cities, the removal of every stone which marked their existence, and the sowing of the ground with salt, so that it might ever after be sterile. Of the efficacy of the latter part of the proceeding, some doubts might be entertained. In more modern times the residence of some notorious criminal has, in like manner, been destroyed and removed with the solemn declaration by the State that the ground upon which it had stood should be held as accursed, and that no building should ever be erected upon it. There are two noteworthy instances in which, in addition, a stone column with an inscription describing the crime and its punishment was erected upon the site of the dwelling of the criminal. The first in order of date is still in existence in Genoa. A certain Julius Cæsar Vacchero, known as the "richest merchant of Genoa," entered into a conspiracy in 1628 to destroy the republican government of Genoa and to deliver the State to the Duke of Savoy. He was beheaded with many of his fellow conspirators, his wife and children were banished, and by a decree of the Senate his palace was razed to the ground, every stone removed, and a pillar with an inscription devoting him to "eternal infamy" was erected on its site. A naval officer* who visited the spot a few years

* Captain Greer, now Rear Admiral Greer, U. S. N. (Retired). He copied the inscription, which corresponds exactly with that given in the account of Vacchero's conspiracy in the *Archivio storico d'Italia*, an important collection of public documents published by the Italian Government, and amounting to nearly a hundred volumes.

ago described to me the desolate appearance of this vast space of ground overgrown with brambles and weeds, with the weather-beaten stone pillar in its centre. In reply to his enquiries, no one could tell him anything of the story connected with the place, only that the ground was "accursed," and the pillar was "*colonna d'infamia*."

The other column was erected in Milan, in 1630, and the tragedy it commemorated is the subject of the present sketch.

Traditions of the terrible pestilence known as the Black Death, which ravaged Europe in 1348, and which, according to estimates made from such sources as were accessible, swept away one-third of the inhabitants of the known world, were still rife in Milan when the great plague of 1630 broke out in that city. A writer has left a vivid description of the conditions brought about by the former visitation. He says:

"Wild places were sought for shelter; some went into ships and anchored themselves afar off on the waters. But the angel that was pouring the vial had a foot on the sea as well as on the dry land. No place was so wild that the plague did not visit—none so secret that the quick-sighted pestilence did not discover—none could fly that it did not overtake.

"For a time all commerce was in coffins and shrouds, but even that ended. Shrift there was none; churches and chapels were open, but neither priests nor penitents entered—all went to the charnel-house. The sexton and the physician were cast into the same deep and wide grave; the testator, and his heirs and executors were hurled from the same cart into the same hole together. Fire became extinguished, as if its element had expired, and the seams of the sailorless ships yawned to the sun. Though doors were open and coffer unwatched, there was no theft; all offenses ceased, and no cry but the universal woe of the pestilence was heard among men."

There is nothing more cruel than fear, and no fear more debasing than that which is engendered by the presence or approach of a pestilence. We have not been without some experience of this in our own day, but when we add to this ignominious cowardice, the gross ignorance and superstition which existed at the period of which I am about to speak, we can understand, partly at least, how such a story became possible.

Manzoni, the famous Italian writer, the author of the best romance of the century in his language, "*I promessi sposi*," "The Betrothed," has told the story of this Milanese column in a small work published in 1840, *Storia della Colonna infame*. It has not been translated into English, though there is a French version of it.

The column in question was erected in 1630, and was blown down during a storm, in 1788. The inscription upon it was in Latin, which, in its construction, very closely resembles some portions of the inscription on the Genoese pillar. The literal translation of it is this :

"Here, where this plot of ground extends, formerly stood the shop of the barber Giangiacomo Mora, who had conspired with Guglielmo Piazza, Commissary of the Public Health, and with others, while a frightful plague exercised its ravages, by means of deadly ointments spread on all sides, to hurl many citizens to a cruel death. For this, the Senate, having declared them both to be enemies of their country, decreed that, placed on an elevated car, their flesh should be torn with red-hot pincers, their right hands be cut off, and their bones be broken ; that they should be extended on the wheel, and at the end of six hours be put to death, and burnt. Then, and that there might remain no trace of these guilty men, their possessions should be sold at public sale, their ashes thrown into the river, and to perpetuate the memory of their deed the Senate wills that the house in which the crime was projected shall be razed to the ground, shall never be rebuilt, and that in its place a column shall be erected which shall be called Infamous. Keep afar off, then, afar off, good citizens, lest this accursed ground should pollute you with its infamy. August, 1630."

This barbarous sentence was executed in all its details, and for a hundred and fifty years, this pillar, intended to blast the memory of two really innocent persons, stood as the proof of the ignorance and credulity of their judges. In 1777, a certain Count Pietro Verri, Counsellor of State in the service of the Empress Maria Theresa, wrote a work, which, however, did not see the light until 1804, twenty-seven years later, entitled (translated) "Remarks upon torture, with special relation to the effects of the baleful ointments to which was attributed the plague which devastated Milan in the year 1630." Count

Verri had carefully perused all the records of the trial of Piazza and Mora, and while pointing out the injustice done these wretched men, he decried in good set phrase the legalized use of torture. It is not surprising that he delayed the publication of his treatise. As late as 1768 the Empress Maria Theresa had authorized the publication of a codification of the laws relating to the use of torture by the courts. The judicial application of torture, or "the question," as it was termed by a delicate euphemism, comes down from the Roman code of laws. Count Verri quotes from the writings of many jurists as to the rights of the accused, and the power of the judges, in cases where it was necessary to extract the truth. The late Dr. Welling, of Washington, delivered an address on the law of torture, giving the codification of Guazzini, a famous Italian jurisconsult, which was published in 1612. There is a wonderful resemblance in the provisions of all these laws as described by Guazzini, Verri, and the later codification of Maria Theresa. Great discretion was given to the judges, but they were forbidden to apply the torture in any case more than three times. If the accused, appropriately named *l'afflitto*, the sufferer, bore these three administrations without confessing, then he was to be held guiltless as by Divine decision. In the "Ancient customs of Brittany," a very curious compilation made in 1330 and 1340, the same limitation was made, and if the accused bore it all without yielding, then he was to be, in the language of the compiler, "Safe and free, because it was evident that God exhibited miracles for him."

Another provision of the law regulating the application of torture, which was violated in the case in question, was that which forbids its use for the discovery of the *corpus delicti*, which must appear *aliunde*—from other sources—but only for the purpose of discovering the author and accomplices of the crime. Here there was certainly neither dead body nor injured person.

The preparation of the accused for the torture was ceremonious. It was a general belief of the times that an amulet or compact with the evil one which would enable him to endure the cruellest suffering and thus evade the desired confession, might be concealed in his clothes, hair, or even in his stomach or bowels. His clothing was therefore changed, every par-

ticle of hair was shaved off, and a purgative was given him, so that he might be effectually deprived of all diabolic aid. Piazza was thus prepared every time that he was tortured.* The belief in this protective power was of ancient date. A distinguished Italian magistrate,† in a work on criminal law published in 1532, states that an accused man revealed the secret of his ability to resist torture and refrain from cries or disclosures. He confessed that one of his relatives had prepared for him a cake of wheat flour, to which was added the mixed milk of a mother and daughter. Every day he was to swallow some crumbs of this cake, and as long as it lasted it insured his insensibility to torment. On the other hand, there were certain liquids and greases which, when rubbed into the body of an accused person, counteracted all his protective charms, and, says Marsiliis, with cynical exultation, "when that was done one could hear the joints crack and the bones sing." M. Le Blanc‡ says that these counter-charms were known in England in the 12th century, in Italy in the 14th century, and in China to quite recent days.§

The original account of the proceedings which led to the tragic end of Piazza and Mora is that of the Canon Ripamonti. He was born in 1577, and was historiographer of Milan. He published the first ten volumes of the Ecclesiastical History of Milan, in 1617, and by request of the Decurions wrote an account of the plague which devastated the city in 1630. This latter is a quarto book of 410 pages, written in Latin, and published at Milan in 1641. The title-page is a copper-plate engraving, curiously emblematic. There is a gigantic skeleton filling the entire page; his hands hold weapons, armor, and books of devotion; his bony feet protrude from under a carpet on which lies a man, the victim of the plague. In front

* "Abraso prius dicto Gulielmo, et vestibus Curiae induto, propinata etiam potione ea purgante." (Processo [etc.], p. 41.)

† Hippolytus de Marsiliis. *Practica criminalis* [etc.], fol., Venetiis, 1532, fol. 12.

‡ Le Blanc, (Edmond). *De l'ancien croyance à des moyens secrets de défier la torture*. Paris, 1892, p. 14.

§ Bodin states that magic words conferring immunity under torture were sometimes written on the scalp of sorcerers, where it was concealed by the hair. (*De la démonomanie des sorcières*, 1587.)

of the skeleton is an altar with a crucifix, to which a woman, seated, with the usual naked boy attending her, points with a sword.

Two hundred years later, in 1841, this work was translated into Italian by Francesco Cusani, who has added many valuable notes in an appendix.

In 1839 the full official account of the trials of the "Anointers" was published in Milan.* It is in Italian, but all that relates to the application of the torture is discreetly veiled in the less familiar Latin, which, however, the modern editor has translated into Italian.

From these sources the facts have been obtained, now to be briefly presented.

Early in the morning of the 21st of June, 1630, during the prevalence of the plague in Milan, a woman of the lower classes saw from her window a man going down the street who was writing on a paper. He wiped his fingers on the wall of a house, probably to get rid of ink-stains, but with the readiness of ignorance and fear, she was sure that he was smearing deadly ointments to promote the spread of the pestilence. A crowd of excited women invaded the Council-chamber, and the Senate was informed of the occurrence. Orders were immediately given to trace out and arrest the guilty man.

It must seem strange to us that the rulers of a great city, even at that time, could have been so ignorant as to believe that such means could be productive of the pestilence, or that any man or men could desire to destroy their fellow-citizens, and risk their own lives besides. But extraordinary occurrences demanded extraordinary causes to account for them. The plague was attributed to hail, to the poisoning of the fountains by the Jews—to deadly ointments so placed that passers-by would touch them. It became dangerous for any one to touch walls or buildings. Ripamonti relates that three French travelers admiring the façade of a building, one of them touched the marble, and was immediately set upon by the mob and dragged half dead to the prison. An old man, 80 years of age, about to sit down on a bench in the church of San Antonio, wiped off the dust with his cloak. A woman

* *Processo originale degli Untori nella peste del 1630. Milan, 1839.*
8°.

cried out that he was anointing the benches, and even there, in the house of God, the worshippers beat and kicked the life out of the unfortunate man. Such was the spirit of the time.

The earliest notice, perhaps, of this belief in "Anointers" is to be found in the works of Guy de Chauliac, who was physician to Pope Clement VI and was living in Avignon, in 1348, when the Black Death ravaged that city. He says: "It was believed that the Jews had poisoned the world, for which reason they were slain. In other places they drove away beggars after cutting off their ears * * * and if it was found that any one had powders or ointments, he was compelled to swallow them, to show they were not poisons.*

Ambroise Paré, in his *Livre de la peste*, throws further light on the matter. In his Advice to Magistrates, during the visitation of the pestilence, he concludes the chapter thus:

"What shall I add? They must keep an eye on certain thieves, murderers, poisoners, worse than inhuman, who grease and smear the walls and doors of rich houses with matter from buboes and carbuncles, and other excretions of the plague-stricken, so as to infect the houses and thus be enabled to break into them, pillage and strip them, and even strangle the poor sick people in their beds; which was done at Lyons in the year 1565. God! what punishment such fellows deserve; but this I leave to the discretion of the Magistrates who have charge of such duties."†

The scrivener, with the ink-horn at his belt, was discovered, and proved to be a certain Guglielmo Piazza, a commissioner of health, a petty officer employed to report cases of the disease. He stoutly denied all knowledge of the crime charged to him, and maintained his resolution through two applications of torture, although the second one was the "question extraordinary," in which atrocious complications were added to the ordinary proceeding. But in his cell, broken down with the effects of the torments he had twice experienced, and dreading their renewal, which he knew would come, the unhappy man yielded to the insidious suggestions of those around him. He confessed his guilt, and declared that he obtained the death-dealing ointment from the barber Giangiacomo Mora.

*Cirurgica, 1499, fol. 19.

†Œuvres, 1575, fol., p 662.

The latter was immediately arrested, but was likewise vehement in his declarations of innocence, avowing that he had never seen or known Piazza. The latter was made of sterner stuff than the barber, who yielded at the first application of the torture, and confessed everything they suggested to him. From that time on these two wretched men vied with each other in manufacturing falsehoods. They implicated even a Count Padilla, the son of the Commandant of the Castle. He was arrested, but having powerful friends, his trial did not take place until long after the execution of Piazza and Mora. It was from the documentary evidence on his trial that Count Verri obtained the full details of the iniquitous treatment of the two victims who had perished. Count Padilla was ultimately acquitted.

Mora, the barber, had a wife and five children; the eldest, a young man, assisting him in his business. The latter was arrested with his father, and the entire contents of the shop were seized and carried to the court. As was usual in those days, the barber dabbled in medicine, and he declared, no doubt with truth, that the various pans and vessels contained remedies for or preservatives from the pest. The sale of these specifics was very extensive. A man who was hanged for robbery during the height of the pestilence confessed, with the rope around his neck, that he had prepared an ointment as a charm against the Anointers. Cusani, in his notes, gives the formula of what became known as *Unguento dell' Impiccato*, "The ointment of the hanged man." It may take its place with the "Vinegar of the four thieves," which had its origin during the plague of Marseilles. Its composition was supposed to be: Wax, 3 ounces; olive oil, 2 ounces; oil of ivy, oil of stone, leaves of anethum, or dill, laurel berries, sage and rosemary, of each half an ounce. A little vinegar was added.

It is interesting to observe that these remedies, or preventatives, were composed almost entirely of aromatics, some of which furnish the accepted germicides of our own day. The apertures of the body were to be especially guarded by application of these waters or tinctures. Ambroise Paré recommends that a surgeon called to attend patients with the plague should first be purged and bled. Next he should have two issues made, one at the insertion of the deltoid of the right

arm, and another about three fingers' breadth below the left knee. He considerably adds that these need not be made if the surgeon already has any running sore. "For truly," he declares, "we know from experience, that they who have such open sores, have not been subject to the plague, and have taken no harm, though they were every day among cases of it." *

Paré also gives a formula of a "Preservative water," with which the surgeon was to wash his whole body "very frequently," and he adds, "it is a good thing to wash the mouth with it, and draw a little of it up the nose, and put a few drops into the ear."

This preservative consisted of a mixture of rose water, elder-flower water, and wine, in which were boiled, by slow heat, the roots of inula, angelica, gentian, bistort and zedoary; also the leaves of sage, rosemary, wormwood and rue; juniper and ivy berries with lemon peel, and the mystic theriac and mithridate were finally added.

As a proof of the danger of contact with the bodies of infected persons, Paré relates in his vivid style how he himself nearly fell a victim to a sudden deadly syncope, the result of the overpowering effluvia which arose from the buboes and carbuncles of a plague-patient, as he uncovered him. Upon regaining consciousness he sneezed violently ten or twelve times, so that his nose bled, and he attributes his escape to "virtue of the expulsive power of his brain, seeing that all his other faculties were dead for the time." †

The barber's acquaintance with Piazza seems to have been limited to occasional visits of the latter to his shop for the usual service of his trade, and they both stated that Mora had undertaken to prepare a pot of his "preservative" for his customer. On this slight foundation was built a superstructure of conspiracy for wholesale murder, by the never-failing power of torture. Once, in his agony, the wretched barber cried to his judges that if they would tell him what they wanted him to say, he would say it! He confessed everything that was insidiously suggested, such as that he had mixed foam from the mouths of those dead of the plague with his ointment, and then declared that Piazza, whose business took

* *Op. cit.*, 663.

† *Op. cit.*, p. 664.

him among the dead bodies, had supplied him with the material.

In the account of the trial there is frequent allusion to the "purging the infamy" of the accused. A Roman law, given by Justinian,* provides that gladiators, slaves, and infamous persons like them, when called as witnesses, should be first put to the torture, so as to insure their telling the truth. In like manner, in the Italian laws regulating the legal application of torture, the accused person was declared to be "infamous," and his implication of others in his crime was not to be accepted as proof, unless he maintained his charge while subjected to torture. If he then reiterated his declaration he was said to have "purged his infamy," and his evidence was admitted. Piazza, as he involved others in his accusations, was, on each fresh occasion, tortured to "purge his infamy," and thus make his charges applicable. The degree of suffering inflicted upon him seems to have been much lighter than on other occasions. He had been promised immunity from his sentence by the Auditor of the Court if he made full confession, another instance of the treachery of these officials, for the Governor only could exercise such power.

More than once, Piazza and Mora recanted, and declared that their confessions were false, and uttered only in fear of further torments. A threat of another application of the question, and, above all, the hope that if no longer recalcitrant they might expect some mitigation of the horrible punishment which had been decreed as their fate, soon reduced them to submission. They were in the hands of men who were destitute of pity. The plague was raging, and the populace, fierce and ignorant, demanded their victims. The Commandant of the Castle, the father of Count Padilla who had been accused of complicity in the alleged crime, demanded of the Court that the execution of the sentence on Piazza and Mora should be delayed in order that they might be confronted with his son and their accusations be met. The judge refused to accede to his request on the ground that "the people were clamorous."

When the condemned men found that their examinations were at an end, and that, despite the promise of impunity, they

* Digest, *lib.* XX, *tit.* V, *de testibus*, 1, 21.

were to be submitted to the full execution of their terrible sentence, they retracted in their confessions to the priest all the charges they had made against other persons, declaring that they were made under the agonies of torture, or in the apprehension of further suffering.

In the collection of medical portraits and engravings in the library of the Surgeon-General's office, at Washington, is an elaborate print, representing in all its details the execution of Piazza and Mora.

The engraving, which is from a copper-plate, is about sixteen inches square. It was published in Rome by the authority of the Nuncio of the Roman College. The engraver was Horatio Colombo. There is no date, but it is probable that it was brought out close upon the event it commemorates.*

The title on the top is (translated), "The sentence pronounced on those who had poisoned many persons in Milan in the year 1630." This is followed by the names of the Magnificos who sat in judgment, and the particulars of the punishment decreed. Each scene in the picture has its letter, which is referred to in an explanatory legend below. The entire disregard of the unities of time and place which characterized such productions is well displayed in this curious engraving. On the right is the shop of the barber Mora, and in front of it the "Column of Infamy" is already erected. A large platform car, drawn by two oxen, exhibits the victims, executioners, and priests. A brazier of live charcoal contains the pincers with which the flesh was to be torn. The barber's right hand is on the block, and a chopper held over the wrist is about to be struck down by a wooden mallet held aloft by the executioner. Further on is seen a large platform, on which the two victims are having their limbs broken by an iron bar, preparatory to their exposure on the wheel for six hours. The wheels are also displayed, one of them already on a pole, with the men bound upon it.

Still further on are the fires consuming the bodies, and, last scene of all, on the extreme left is a fussy little stream

* In the *Processo originale degl' Untori*, Milan, 1839, there is at the end a folding plate, which is a poor copy of this engraving. The editor speaks of the original as "una stampa di quel tempo."

foaming under bridges, which is supposed to be a river, and into it a man is throwing the ashes of the two malefactors.

Comment upon this tragic occurrence is needless. It tells its own story and bears its own moral.

A few words may be added as to the mortality of this pestilence and the measures adopted by the authorities to encounter it. Like all statistics of those early times, the estimates are variable, but there are letters from the Sanità to the Governor, which state the then daily mortality at 500. It is probable that the total number of deaths was about 150,000.

The tribunal of the Sanità, a body something like a modern board of health, seem to have acted with sense and energy, though impeded by the obstinacy and ignorance of the Senate, the Council of Decurions and the Magistrates. To declare that the plague had appeared in Milan was to drive the people off, and to frighten trade away. The two physicians of the Sanità, Taddino and Settala, scarcely dared to appear in the streets, and the latter, who was 80 years old, nearly lost his life from the angry mob. Later, when the existence of the pestilence had to be admitted, some strange precautions were adopted. An immense procession was to proceed through the city in honor of San Carlo and to implore his aid, and the authorities ordered the doors of all sequestered houses to be nailed up lest the distempered inmates should try to join the procession. There were 500 such houses, according to the Cavalier Somiglia, who also wrote an account of this fearful time.

An immense hospital was constructed to accommodate 2,000 persons, though at one time, in the height of the disease, the number of its patients had increased to 16,000. The pits dug for the dead became filled, and bodies in all stages of putrefaction were lying in houses and in the streets. In despair, the Sanità applied to two priests who had been efficient in their aid. They promised that in four days all the corpses should be removed. They went into the country, and summoning the people in the name of religion, they succeeded in having three immense pits dug. The *monatti* of the Sanità were employed to bring out the dead, and in the stipulated time the good fathers had fulfilled their pledge. The persons in the employ of the Sanità for removing corpses were of three grades. The *monatti* carried the bodies out of the houses and

carted them to the pits. The *apparitori*, or summoners (the name is still preserved in the English Ecclesiastical Courts as apparitors) went before with a bell notifying the people to bring out their dead. The *commissari* were in control of the other two. It will be remembered that the unfortunate Piazza was a commissario.



FIG. 2.

Among the precautions taken by physicians for their own protection, while visiting plague-stricken patients, was the

adoption of a particular dress. Paré recommends that the material should be camlet, serge, satin, taffeta, or morocco, but not cloth, frieze, or fur, lest these latter should harbor the poison, and death should be thus conveyed to the healthy. Manget, in his *Traité de la peste* (Genève, 1721, 2 vols.), has a frontispiece to the first volume representing the dress of a doctor during the plague at Marseilles. From his description it seems that the mantle, breeches, shirt, boots, gloves, and hat, were all of morocco leather. The beak attached to the mask was filled with aromatics, the air passing over them in respiration. Figure 2 is a reproduction of this plate from Manget's work. In a recent number of *Janus* (Amsterdam, 1897, p. 297), M. Reber gives an interesting account of an engraving in his possession, the work of the artist John Melchior Fuesslin, which also represents a doctor at Marseilles during the plague, and is, he thinks, of about the same date as the work of Manget. His engraving is herewith reproduced as Fig. 3. The legend underneath may be translated:

"Sketch of a Cordovan-leather-clad doctor of Marseilles, having also a nose-case filled with smoking material to keep off the plague. With the wand he is to feel the pulse."

In Manget's sketch the *Steklein* becomes a veritable stick, but the information conveyed by it would probably be quite as useful in the one case as in the other. The appearance of this leather-clad doctor, with his *nez fumant*, could scarcely have been reassuring to the plague-stricken wretch.

Since this address was written I have received the March number of the *Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Journal*, which contains a notice of the Manget and Reber sketches, by Dr. L. M. Griffiths, the accomplished assistant editor. He reproduces the plates from the *Janus* blocks, and mentions that an amulet of arsenic was worn on the chest in time of plague, as a prophylactic, in the city of Bristol, as well as elsewhere. He quotes Kemp's treatise, 1665, thereanent. Ambroise Paré had, however, recommended this device a hundred years before. It was to be worn over the heart, in order that "the heart might become accustomed to poison, and so be the less injured when other poisons sought it."



Abriß eines in Corduan-Leeder bekleideten mit
 einem von Pest vertreibendem Rauchwert angefüll-
 ten Däsen-Güter versehenen Doctors von Marseil-
 le. Der mit einem Stiekel den Puls soll fühlen.

FIG. 3.

